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ABSTRACT

This study examined the psychosocial adjustment of young children who were living in families where domestic violence had occurred, and presented implications for early childhood teachers. The research data were collected in a structured interview with 54 mothers who had at least 1 child between 3 and 6 years of age. These women had left a violent partner from 3 to 24 months prior to participation in the study and were not in a new relationship. The family interview schedule included the administration of the Conflict Tactics Scale, and the mothers also completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). At the time of the interview, 42 percent of the children showed a level of behavioral problems warranting clinical intervention. A series of hierarchical regression analyses was conducted with scores on the CBCL as criteria. The variables of child age, sex, abuse status, level of family violence prior to separation, period of separation, and post-separation contact with the violent partner were the predictors. It was found that a high level of family violence prior to separation was the most consistent predictor for the extent of behavioral problems seen in the child. (Includes suggestions for how early childhood professionals can respond to the needs of children who live in violent families. Contains 34 references.) (Author)

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YOUNG CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: AN IMPORTANT ISSUE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the psychosocial adjustment of young children who were living in families where domestic violence had occurred. Early childhood teachers need to be aware that young children from violent homes may have adjustment problems and that they require social and emotional support from caring adults.

The research data was collected in a structured interview with 54 mothers who had at least one child in the age range of 3 to 6 years. These women had left a violent partner from 3 to 24 months prior to participation in the study and were not in a new relationship. The family interview schedule included the administration of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1992) and the mothers also completed the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach, 1991). At the time of interview, 42% of the children exhibited a level of behavioural problems which would warrant clinical intervention. A series of hierarchical regression analyses was conducted with scores on the CBCL as criteria. The variables of child age, sex, abuse status, level of family violence prior to separation, period of separation and post separation contact with the violent partner were the predictors. It was found that a high level of family violence prior to separation was the most consistent predictor for the extent of behavioural problems currently evidenced by the child. Ideas for how early childhood professionals can respond to the needs of children who live in violent families are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Young children need family environments which foster positive social-emotional and behavioural development. However, children in families characterised by domestic violence do not experience environments which are optimal for their social and emotional well-being. These children will often construct inappropriate interpretations and responses to their experiences of violence which will affect their capacity to relate effectively to others (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990). Wallach (1993) noted that early childhood programs can be major resources to children who have experienced violence, by assisting them to develop alternative perceptions of themselves and by teaching them a range of social skills which would help them cope with their experiences. Resilience in children is developed through abilities to form relationships with others, by effective social problem solving and by the capacity to utilise available social support (Garmezy & Masten, 1991). Early childhood teachers can help offset the negative effects of violence in the lives of young children by providing them with opportunities to develop these abilities in consistent and socially responsive environments.

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UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is an encompassing term, most commonly equated with spousal abuse and it can include physical, verbal, emotional, sexual and financial abuse (New South Wales Domestic Violence Committee, 1990). In the majority of cases, the violence is perpetrated by men against women (South Australian Domestic Violence Council, 1987). Violence against women is a serious problem in Australian society and different surveys indicate that from one in three, to one in five families experience domestic violence (Easteal, 1994). Spousal abuse often begins in the family as soon as children are born, since infants and toddlers present significant stress on family life (Moore, 1979). As a result, many children from infancy observe the violence between their parents and experience the impact of the violence on family functioning.

As witnesses to domestic violence, children not only see and overhear the violence but are exposed to its results by observing parental distress and physical injury. Research has found that children are frequently victims of physical abuse in families where there is domestic violence (Gelles, 1987; Hughes, 1988; Jouriles, Barling & O'Leary, 1987). In the last decade, there has been a greater awareness of the experiences of children as witnesses and victims of family violence, and how the level and nature of that violence impacts upon family functioning and children's adjustment.

Fear and isolation often characterise families experiencing domestic violence. Blame is often accorded to women for its occurrence and for staying in relationships when violence continues to occur. For such reasons, domestic violence is often under-reported. Easteal (1994) proposed that violence in the family is not reported because of three rules that dominate in such family environments - *Don't talk, Don't trust* and *Don't feel*. Explicitly, women and children may be told not to discuss the violence outside the family and even within the family, the violence may not be discussed. Implicitly, there may be an ongoing denial of the reality so that the experience of the violence becomes normative. Children living with domestic violence learn that rules made, may not be enforced and that promises made, may not be kept. Parenting may be impaired by the unpredictable nature of domestic violence as women try to protect their children or compensate for the behaviours of the violent spouse. Children are likely to have reduced self-esteem and to have problems in developing social relationships with peers and other adults (Grossier, 1986 cited in Jaffe et al, 1990; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson & Zak, 1985).

Children's responses to witnessing the assaults on their mother may vary according to their age, sex and role in the family. Factors such as the extent and frequency of the violence, repeated separations and dislocations in place of residence, economic and social disadvantage may also impact on children's adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Jaffe et al, 1990). Violence does not necessarily cease on separation and continuing violence after separation presents ongoing stress on mothers and children (Johnson, Gonzalez & Campbell, 1987).

The age and sex of the child are two important child characteristics which have been studied in the research with children who are growing up in violent families. There are equivocal findings with respect to sex. While early studies found that behavioural problems were more common for boys rather than girls (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Porter & O'Leary, 1980), later studies found that both boys and girls were adversely affected by exposure to parental conflict (Emery & O'Leary, 1984; Jouriles, Pfiffner & O'Leary, 1988). However, higher levels of violence have been found to be more strongly associated with poorer behavioural adjustment for boys (Trickett & Susman, 1989; Wolfe et al, 1985). Research findings with respect to age have not found that any one age group is more affected than another by parental conflict. Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen and Anderson (1989) indicated that although younger children may be less able to cope with conflict, they are also likely to be less aware of the conflict and its implications. Cummings (1987) in investigating children's responses to anger between adults found that 4-5 year old children showed more distress, but also more adaptive coping responses, than 2-3 year old children.

Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz (1980) reported that 40% of children who witness domestic violence are also victims of child abuse. Sternberg et al (1993) found that children who witnessed domestic violence and were victims of parental abuse exhibited higher levels of behavioural problems than children who were either witnesses to marital violence or who were abused. Effects which are attributed to child abuse only, may also reflect the additional effects of exposure to violence between parents (Trickett & Susman, 1989). Cummings and Davies (1994) note that the combined effects on child adjustment of observing parental violence and experiencing parental aggression are not clearly understood.

Two of the dimensions of marital disputes which are strongly implicated in children's adjustment are the frequency and the intensity of the conflict. Increased exposure to physical aggression is more likely to lead to a greater incidence of behavioural problems (Johnson et al, 1987; Jouriles et al, 1987; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). Johnson et al (1987) reported that the degree of verbal and physical aggression was related to children's behavioural problems two years after separation. More extreme levels of marital violence were also found to be associated with child behaviour problems (Jouriles, Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; Wolfe et al, 1985). Conflict which involves physical aggression across a period of time is also more likely to impact on children's subsequent adjustment (Hershorn & Rosenbaum, 1985; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Jouriles et al, 1989). Shaw and Emery (1988) and Johnson et al (1987) found that parental violence often increased after separation and that the ongoing conflict appeared to be more closely related to internalising behavioural problems than externalising behaviour problems in children. Ongoing conflict may be centred on a child because of custody-related issues, pressure to enter into an alliance against the other parent, or parental dependence for emotional support. Such stress may induce withdrawal, anxiety or depression (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

FOCUS OF STUDY

In this study, young children's experiences of domestic violence and the effects of those experiences on behavioural adjustment were investigated. Consistent with other research findings, it was expected that higher levels of family violence would be associated with greater levels of behavioural problems in young children. Other factors reported in the literature which are likely to affect behavioural adjustment were also examined in a predictive model. Age, sex, abuse status of the child, the period of separation and the frequency of contact with the violent partner after separation were variables included in testing the model to explain the behavioural adjustment of young children who had experienced domestic violence.

METHOD

Subjects

Fifty-four mothers participated in this study that examined the medium-term effects of witnessing spousal violence on the behavioural adjustment of young children, aged three to six years. The mean age of the children (the oldest child of the mother, in the age range 3 to 6 years) was 5.3 years (SD=1.4). There were 25 girls and 29 boys in the sample. The women had between one and five children living with them. Seventy-six percent of the women's partners were the subject child's natural father.

The participants in the research were women who were former residents in women's refuges but who were living independently in the community when the study was undertaken. They were voluntary participants who were recruited through services provided to women who had experienced domestic violence. All the women had separated from their violent spouse and were not in a new domestic relationship. Seventy-two percent of the women reported that they had left their former partner more than once. Two-thirds of the mothers had been separated for three to twelve months and one-third had been separated for one to two years. The number of years that

the couples had been together ranged from 1 to 21 years with the mean length of the relationship being 7.5 years (SD=5.1 years).

Of the women, 31 % were aged between 20 and 29 years. Fifty-five percent were aged between 30 and 39 years and 12% were over 40 years of age. Fifteen percent had tertiary educational qualifications, 6% had college or paraprofessional training, 17% had completed secondary school, 54% had completed to Grade 10 of secondary school and 8% had completed primary school only. Seventy-one percent of the women were engaged with full-time household responsibilities at the time they were interviewed. All the women received an annual income of less than $22,000 and 81% were receiving a social security benefit.

Procedure

Structured interviews were conducted with each mother about the oldest child in the specified age group. The interviews took approximately three hours to complete and were conducted by women interviewers who were, or who had been employed in domestic violence counselling or refuge services. The interviews were also taped so that the interviewers' written records could be checked for accuracy.

Measures

Parental Conflict. The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) - Form R (Straus, 1992) was administered to the mothers. The CTS measures the frequency of verbal aggression and the number of acts of minor and severe physical aggression between the mother and her partner during the twelve months prior to separation. The CTS lists fifteen acts of verbal and physical aggression. The respondents were required to indicate how often their partner had carried out each action towards them and how often they had carried out each action in relation to their ex-partner during the last year of their relationship. Responses were recorded on a seven-point scale of frequency of occurrence, ranging from never to more than 20 times. The scores for each partner for the scale items were then summed to obtain a measure of family violence. Straus (1992) has reported moderate to high reliability for the scale. Across studies, correlations of agreement between reports from husbands and wives, have shown an average correlational agreement of 0.4.

Children's Experience of Violence. Mothers reported on their child's experience of violence prior to separation. This involved an estimation of the percentage of physical violence seen by the child. Mothers were also asked whether their child had experienced physical abuse. Abuse status was dichotomously scored as not abused (0) and abused (1).

Post-Separation Experiences. Mothers were asked to indicate the period of separation, and the frequency of the contact that their child had with the violent partner after separation. Frequency of contact was measured on a five-point scale from no contact (0) to daily contact (5). Mothers were also asked whether they had experienced verbal or physical violence in the post-separation period.

Child Adjustment. Mothers completed the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach, 1991) for the subject child. The CBCL contains a list of 113 behavioural items which mothers rate on a three-point scale with regard to how well the behaviours describe their child. Nine narrow-band scales are derived from these items. These syndrome scales are withdrawal, somatic complaints, anxiety/depression, social problems, thought problems, attention problems, aggressive behaviour, delinquent behaviour and sex problems. Two broad-band scales are also derived from the items. These scales are internalising behaviour (the sum of the subscale scores for withdrawal, somatic complaints, and anxiety/depression) and externalising behaviour (the sum of the subscale scores for aggressive behaviour and delinquent behaviour). A total score for behavioural problems is also obtained by summing across subscales. The scores for internalising, externalising and total behaviour problems can be reported in a standardised form (T-scores) to enable comparison across

studies. The CBCL has been extensively used in studies of separated families, and has considerable normative data and satisfactory psychometric properties (Achenbach, 1991).

RESULTS

Level of Parental Conflict

The mean score on the Conflict Tactic Scale (CTS) for the number of minor and severe physically aggressive acts perpetrated by the mothers' partners in the last twelve months of the relationship was 17.88 (SD=12.60) violent incidents per year. For mothers, the mean number of acts perpetrated was 3.24 (SD=3.93). The mean scores on the verbal aggression subscale of the CTS for mothers was 13.25 (SD=7.19) and for partners was 24.47 (SD=6.44). The mean of the combined mothers' and partners' verbal and physical aggression scores (Family Violence Score) on the CTS was 60.43 (SD=21.2).

Children as Witnesses

Mothers indicated that 38.9% of the children witnessed 80 to 100% of violent incidents, 13% of the children witnessed 60 to 79% of the violence, 22.2% witnessed 40 to 59% of the violence, 14.8% witnessed 20 to 39% of the violence and 11.1% witnessed less than 20% of the violence. Only 3.8% of the mothers indicated that their child did not see any violence. In sum, half of the children witnessed at least 60 % of the violence.

Child Abuse

Forty-eight percent of the women reported that at least one child in the family had been physically abused by their partner. This included 35.2% of the subject children.

Post-Separation Experiences

Seventy-two percent of the women had left their partner more than once. The mean separation time was 10.1 months (SD=1.17). Mothers reported that 46.3% of the children had no contact or infrequent contact with their former partner and 55.7% reported frequent contact. For many of the mothers, the violence did not cease on separation. Seventy-four percent of the mothers reported that their partners had behaved in a manner which had frightened them since separation. One-third of the mothers were physically assaulted after separation and in fourteen of these eighteen cases, the children had witnessed these assaults. Fifty-four percent of the mothers also reported that during contacts with their former partner for reasons of child access, they were verbally abused.

Children's Adjustment as a Group

The results confirmed a higher than average level of behavioural problems among these children. The most frequently reported problems for male children on the CBCL syndrome scales were for withdrawn behaviours (e.g., rather be alone, won't talk), whereas social problems (e.g., acts young, clings) were most frequently reported for girls. A standardised score above the 90th percentile (T-score > 63) on the broad-band scales and for total behaviour problems on the CBCL has been proposed as the level at which clinical intervention with the child is warranted (Achenbach, 1991). Twenty-two (42%) of the children had scores for total behaviour problems that were above the 90th percentile. This trend was greatest for boys with thirteen boys and nine girls in the clinical range. For the externalising scale, 41 % of boys and 28 % of girls had behavioural scores which were higher than the 90th percentile. For the internalising scale, 26% of boys and 24% of girls had scores greater then the 90th percentile. More boys than girls were in the clinical range on these scales but these gender differences were not significant. The means and standard deviations for the children's scores on the broad-band scales and for total behaviour problems on the CBCL are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR THE CBCL

	Overall (N = 54) Mean (SD)	Boys (N = 29) Mean (SD)	Girls (N = 25) Mean (SD)
Total Behaviour Problems	59.8 (10.1)	60.9 (10.8)	58.5(9.6)
External. Problems	57.4 (11.0)	58.7 (11.6)	56.0 (10.4)
Internal. Problems	57.0 (10.7)	58.8 (11.0)	54.9 (10.1)

Parental Conflict and Child Adjustment

Table 2 presents the correlations between the predictors and the child adjustment variables. Age was significantly associated with higher scores for total behaviour problems ($r=.29$, $p < .05$), and internalising behavioural problems ($r=.42$, $p < .01$). Higher levels of family violence were significantly associated with higher scores for total behaviour problems ($r=.34$, $p < .01$), externalising problems ($r=.31$, $p < .05$) and internalising problems ($r=.40$, $p < .01$).

TABLE 2

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PREDICTOR AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT VARIABLES

Predictor Variables	Total Score CBCL	External. Scale CBCL	Internal. Scale CBCL
Sex	-.15	-.09	-.17
Age	.29*	.22	.42**
Abuse Status	.09	.08	-.02
FCTS[a]	.34**	.31*	.40**
Period of Separation	.21	.19	.20
Frequency of Contact	-.02	-.02	-.07

*p < .05
**p < .01
[a]FCTS - Score for Family Violence (combined scores for mothers and their partners) on the Conflict Tactics Scale

Relative and Joint Influences: Hierarchical Regression Analyses

A series of hierarchical regression analyses was conducted in order to explore the cumulative and relative influences of a number of variables on children's adjustment scores. The variables - sex, age, family violence score, child abuse status, period of separation and frequency of contact with the violent partner after separation were used the predictive model. The criterion variables were the scores for total behavioural problems and the scores for the externalising and internalising scales of the CBCL. For each hierarchical analysis, the first set of variables simultaneously entered was sex, age, abuse status and family violence score. A second set of variables representing post separation contact with the violent partner (period of separation, frequency of post separation contact) was then entered into each regression equation.

For the **Total Behavioural Problem Score,** sex and age, abuse status and the family violence score accounted for 21% of the variance (Adj. R^2 = 15%) and significantly predicted the total behavioural problem score, F (4,49) = 3.37, p = .016. After controlling for sex, age, child abuse and family violence, post-separation variables (period of separation and frequency of contact) did not add significantly to the prediction of the total behavioural adjustment scores, (R^2_{Change} = 3%).

For the scores on the **Externalising Scale,** sex and age, abuse status and the family violence score accounted for 22.7% of the variance (Adj. R^2 = 16.4%) and significantly predicted externalising scores, F (4,49) = 3.36, p = .012. After controlling for sex, age, child abuse and family violence, the two post-separation variables did not add significantly to the prediction of externalising scores, (R^2_{Change} = 3%).

For the scores on the **Internalising Scale,** sex and age, abuse status and the family violence score accounted for 27.2% of the variance (Adj. R^2 = 21%) and significantly predicted internalising scores, F (4,49) = 4.59, p = .003. The post-separation variables did not significantly improve the prediction of internalising scores (R^2_{Change} = 2%).

The details of these analyses are presented in Table 3. For each behavioural adjustment score (total behaviour problems, externalising scale and internalising scale), the family violence score made a significant contribution to the variance explained. For the internalising scale on the CBCL, the age of the child also made a significant contribution to the variance explained. Family violence prior to separation was the most single important predictor of children's adjustment. The amount of variance explained by the model tested in this study was improved by the addition of the variables for period of separation and frequency of contact, but this was not high. Overall, the explained variance of the tested models represented a significant effect on child adjustment scores.

TABLE 3

CHILD CHARACTERISTICS AND FAMILY EXPERIENCES AS PREDICTORS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL ADJUSTMENT

Criteria/Predictors (and Order of Entry)	Beta	R^2	R^2_{chg}
Total CBCL Score			
1. Sex	.14		
1. Age	.22		
1. Abuse Status	.09		
1. FCTS	.35**	.216**	
2. Period of Separation	.23		
2. Frequency of Contact	.14	.267**	.037
Externalising Scale			
1. Sex	.19		
1. Age	.16		
1. Abuse Status	.01		
1. FCTS	.39**	.227**	
2. Period of Separation	.22		
2. Frequency of Contact	.09	.274**	.036
Internalising Scale			
1. Sex	.08		
1. Age	.38**		
1. Abuse Status	.07		
1. FCTS	.30*	.272**	
2. Period of Separation	.19		
2. Frequency of Contact	.09	.307**	.024

*p < .05
** p < .01

DISCUSSION

Review of Findings

Consistent with past research (Hershorn & Rosenbaum, 1985; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Jouriles et al, 1989; Radovanovic, 1993), higher levels of family violence prior to separation were associated with higher levels of child behavioural problems. Level of family violence was the strongest predictor for total behavioural problems and externalising problems.

Older children were more likely to have higher scores for internalising behaviours, so that age and the level of family violence were both significant in contributing to the prediction of internalising problems. Previous research has found a link between the level of parental conflict and internalising problems in divorced families, and age has been associated with this poorer adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 1994). The age effects may occur because older children have had greater exposure to family discord. Age-related effects could also be due to the development of more stable negative self-evaluations, greater self-blame, or increased feelings of helplessness which can develop as children grow older (Cantwell & Carlson, 1983; Harter, 1985).

Although sex of child, abuse status, period of separation and frequency of contact with the violent partner after separation made a contribution to the overall significance of the models tested, they did not independently make a significant contribution.

Interpretation of the Results

Family violence before separation continued to exert a strong negative impact on children's later adjustment. A limitation of the study was that there was no specific measurement of post-separation violence. In future studies, specific measurement of post separation violence should be measured and tested within the predictive model. High levels of family violence before separation could be indicative of continuing high levels of violence occurring in those families after separation, so that the chronic nature of the violence between the partners continued to impact on the children.

Other environmental stresses could have influenced the children's adjustment scores. These families had been dislocated for periods of time when families had used refuge services before moving to other accommodation in the community. The children had experienced disruptions to routines such as regular attendance in early childhood programs. Maternal stress due to separation, living in a refuge, financial problems and relocation of the family would also impact on the child. As Rutter (1981) suggests, such multiple environmental stresses may have the effect of exponentially increasing the incidence of behavioural and emotional problems.

Implications for Early Childhood Teachers

The results raise important implications for early childhood teachers. Firstly, there are child protection issues given the high level of reported child abuse in the families where domestic violence occurs. Teachers need to be aware of the relevant procedures for reporting child abuse within their organisations, as well as the legislative requirements within their state. Early childhood teachers also need to be aware of the resources available in the community which are concerned with child protection and family support. Secondly, teachers need to understand the extent of behavioural problems that young children with such negative family experiences may evidence and the ongoing nature of the difficulties that the mothers may have in managing children's behaviour after separation. There is a need for teachers to be aware that many of these children may exhibit internalising problems such as withdrawal, anxiety or depression. Children with these types of problems may not be noticed initially as having social-emotional difficulties, since aggressive or attention-seeking behaviours commonly elicit more active responses from adults.

Various strategies for supporting children who have experienced domestic violence have been identified (Butterworth & Fulmer, 1991; Ragg, 1991; Wallach, 1993). Their ideas provide important directions for how early childhood teachers can help young children cope with family conflict and domestic violence, in order to develop skills which will help them to deal with ongoing family stress. The early childhood teacher can provide an environment which has consistency in the routine and which has very clear expectations and limits on behaviour. Early childhood programs can provide interpersonal environments which are characterised by respect for

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cooperative harmonious activities between males and females and for the development of problem-solving skills (Butterworth & Fulmer, 1991; Wallach, 1993).

The difficulties in responding to parental and children's needs are compounded when the children are transitory in their participation in an early childhood programs or irregular in attendance. Family accommodation may change a number of times between refuges and community-based accommodation. However, responding to the needs of these children, even on a short-term basis may have a substantial impact on their current and future capacity to deal with family stress.

The families represented in this study are only a small proportion of separated families and caution is needed about generalising to other populations. Although a high percentage of the children had behavioural problems, many others did not have behavioural difficulties. Future research should focus on identifying the specific experiences and opportunities which help children to cope with less than optimum family circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has provided important information into the experiences of young children who witness domestic violence and high levels of violence were a significant predictor of later behaviour problems. Almost half of these young children had levels of behavioural problems that would warrant clinical intervention. The children had witnessed a substantial proportion of the violence and many had also experienced physical abuse. Early childhood teachers need to be aware of the needs of these children and the nature of the problems which they may exhibit, since support for their social-emotional needs from an early age may foster resilience and help offset the possibilities of later behavioural difficulties.

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